



Cynthia Leitich Smith

346: Curating a Middle Grade Anthology of Intertribal Stories

Gabriela Pereira: Hello, and welcome word nerds to DIY MFA Radio, the show that will help you write more, write better, write smarter. I'm Gabriela Pereira, instigator of DIY MFA, and your host for this podcast. Now, let's talk writing.

Hello. Hello, word nerds. Gabriela here, and welcome back to DIY MFA Radio. Our show notes are at diymfa.com/346 because it's Episode 346. Also, if you're enjoying the podcast, please subscribe on Apple, Google, and you know, all the usual places where you might listen to a podcast, and please leave us a review. This will help other word nerds out there discover the show as well.

Now, today, I have the pleasure of interviewing Cynthia Leitich Smith.

Cynthia is a New York Times bestselling author known for her award-winning children's and YA books. She writes realistic contemporary stories as well as fantastical narratives, and most recently, she won the American Indian Youth Literature YA Award for *Hearts Unbroken*, which is published by Candlewick.

Now, today, we're going to be discussing one of her most recent projects: *Ancestor Approved: Intertribal Stories* for kids. This is a Middle Grade anthology published by Heartdrum, which is a Native-focused imprint at HarperChildren's, where Cynthia is the author-curator.

In addition to her work in publishing, she is also on the faculty of the MFA program in Writing for Children and Young Adults at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is a citizen of the Muscogee Nation and makes her home in Austin, Texas.

Welcome, Cynthia. It is so great to have you here today.

Cynthia Leitich Smith: Thank you so much for having me. I'm delighted.

GP: So, before we dive in and talk about *Ancestor Approved* and all of the juicy craft-related stuff behind it, I wanted to hear the story behind the story – or rather the story behind the anthology. What first inspired you to put this project together in the first place?

CLS: The Cooperative Center for Children's Books at the University of Wisconsin-Madison keeps track of books by and about indigenous people, people of color, and other marginalized groups.

I was on the blog *American Indians in Children's Literature* held by Debbie Reese, Dr. Debbie Reese; and she had broken out the numbers of Native books, even further to age-market categories.

I noticed at the time, that in the Middle Grade category for all of Native representation, there was only one short story. It was by Tim Tingle, a Choctaw writer, and it appeared in a #WeNeedDiverseBooks anthology. That's one short story across the body of literature for Native representation for the entire year.

GP: Wow.



Cynthia Leitch Smith: It just was a jaw-dropping moment. And I thought to myself, you know, there are so many vibrant rising voices, wouldn't it be amazing if we could bring some of them together and create a book that would be an introduction to all of them to Native kidlit for Middle Graders that could help to bridge what was clearly a gap; and potentially, offer a sort of lab opportunity for them to work on their craft for Middle Grade with each other.

Pairing very established authors like Tim and Joseph Bruchac with new voices like Brian Young and Andrea Rogers.

GP: So, talk about the, you're the editor on this anthology. Remind me again, did you write one of the stories as well?

CLS: I did. I wrote one of the stories; it's actually, was probably the last story drafted. In fact, I know it was because what I did as the anthology editor – and that's sort of a term of art – there is an in-house editor, Rosemary Brosnan, who is our editorial genius at Heartdrum; and she certainly provides tremendous guidance.

But for my role, I was doing developmental work with all of the writers and helping them to make connections between the stories and provide a sort of cohesive linked manuscript before we ever send it in for Rosemary's editorial eye. So, once I had a sense of what the stories were, I was able to look at them and think to myself, 'Okay, what might be missing?'

And so, for between lines, I noticed that there were not any stories of kids who were meeting for the first time at powwow and becoming friends. And so, I thought that that would be an interesting storyline.

I was also interested in kind of an alternating gender point of view, and visited that with a couple of characters that I had previously introduced in a Chapbook called Indian Shoes, along with a couple of new ones.

So, as the author organizing the conversation, I saw there was a need for a friendship story of two kids meeting for the first time. And I also noticed that we needed more representation of racial diversity within Indian country.

So, I added a secondary character who was a black Native and also Two-Spirit, which is important in terms of showing that, in addition to tribal affiliation, gender socioeconomics, and so many of the other identity elements highlighted in the book – key part of the community, texture, and blessings of the Native community.

GP: Love it. And as the anthology editor – you mentioned this is a term of art – you said you connected people together, like what did that look like exactly? Was it just sending emails? Was it having people trade their stories? Like, how did that work in terms of logistics and also artistry?

CLS: I began by brainstorming those Native authors who had a history of writing for Middle Grade or teen audiences, figuring that they would be comfortable with a prose format – that they had some experience writing for the age group are near to the age group.

So, that didn't completely discount picture book writers because, of course, some people do both. But I was sort of really focusing on writers for kids who had done work for older young readers, if you will.

From there, I assembled a group of people that I thought might have something to say and he had shown an interest in participating, and we put together an initial list. We went onto a Trello board;



and on the Trello board-- It's an online messaging system, wherein each contributor would add their protagonist's name, a little blurb about what the book was about.

We included world-building information, like what the weather would be the weekend of the powwow, where the story was taking place, particularly, because we are talking about Michigan; and it has some significant weather.

So, that was the factor as well as, what would be the official hotel that would be recommended to folks who were traders at the powwow, from the organizers? Traci Sorell offered to take points, and reach out to them and assemble some research from Ann Arbor's powwow committee, which was extremely helpful.

We had a map of the high school, where the event takes place. So, essentially, all the world-building materials went on a common board plus a cheat sheet to each of the stories; a little bit of bio, and then contact information for the various contributors so they could reach out to one another.

And once we had the manuscripts come in, I was looking for patterns or connections. For example, a couple of the stories both referenced that an uncle of the character was a custodian at the high school, but one was the head custodian.

So, I paired those two writers and I said, "I believe that you have this story element in common, you two should talk to one another and add added note or a nod to that dynamic." And that turned out to be a lovely opportunity.

A couple of the characters had lost parents, and they had an opportunity to meet. I was able to say, "Hey, your character's going from Point A to Point B; they're probably going to be passing this other person who's featured in this earlier story, why don't you two chat and see if there's a moment of connection there that can come out of it."

And so, it's not a novel; it is a short story connection, but it's one in which a reader can sort of enter this fictionalized world of the intertribal and feel like they're really there – that they can turn a corner and see someone that they met an hour earlier in line at the fries stand; and that gives them a more cohesive three-dimensional reading experience.

GP: That's one of the things that I loved the most in reading this book. And I'm about two-thirds of the way through, so I'm not quite finished – so, no spoilers, if there are any major spoilers at the end.

Anyway, but one of the things I'm loving is exactly what you just said, kind of like those little Easter eggs, those little hidden details of like, you know, you read a story and they're stopped at a pit stop somewhere; and then suddenly, you see a character walking out of the gas station that you just read two stories ago of that character. And you're like, 'Oh, I know you,' and it makes--

From a reader's perspective, makes us feel like we're part of that world. It really added sort of a texture and a richness to it. I'm guessing though, that it was also, like, it was tricky to balance all of that. So, were there any moments where there were, sort of, things that you really had to puzzle out to get the stories to fit?

CLS: One of the challenges was really, I mentioned it earlier, deciding weather, because we had some scenes that were set outdoors; and one of them there was-- In some, there was snow--

GP: And there's like--



CLS: It was very cold. Some characters were in coats, and some weren't.

GP: And there was definitely one story that comes to my mind that has some pretty significant weather going on, and it's pretty intense.

CLS: There was some pretty significant intense weather going on in one story; and that pretty significant intense weather was in one version happening during the powwow itself, which would have shifted all of the stories.

And so, we moved it to a couple of days earlier and this worked in part because the stories, they tend to overlap in time, but they're not entirely sequential in time.

GP: Right.

CLS: Some start a significant period of time before the powwow – say, a month or so – some, in the day or two that precedes it. In some cases, you get the journey of the kids up to Ann Arbor from wherever their tribal homes might be. Others do start at Powwow; and some, like my own, continue after it.

So, there is this general from beginning to end feeling, but it has a non-linear aspect to it; and that is a convention of Native writing that oftentimes, the past, present, and future aren't in as strict of a linear line, and they aren't marked as deeply as, say, a flashback might be in a more conventional western style.

So, for young readers who are still new to books, having a short story format gave them a sense of containability for each story; but also, that more fluid indigenous sense of time by embracing the collection as a whole.

GP: I love what you just said about that, the fluid sense of time, because I definitely felt that reading from one story to the next, but like you said, each story is so tightly contained that it didn't feel jarring. Like I didn't feel like I was getting sort of like flash-forward or flashed back to different part.

Like it was easy to navigate as a reader. And I think for, especially for a kids' audience that may not be as familiar with the more fluid timelines, that could pose a challenge to do it any other way.

Can you talk a little bit, you've hinted at this already, the idea of, sort of the specificity of the audience? I mean, Middle Graders are very-- There are specific group of kids, like you said, picture books are a different beast.

Even YA, while there is some crossover between YA and Middle Grade, it's also a very different beast. And had this anthology been a YA anthology, it would've been a very different group of stories. Can you talk about writing an anthology like this for Middle Graders?

CLS: Yes. And one of the things to keep in mind with Middle Graders is that they are at the age where they're going to become avid readers or not, for the most part.

It's really hard to capture them in high school because so much of what they're assigned in class is books that are published for grownups and books that aren't necessarily published for their developmental needs.

Whereas with middle school stories, they are used more in classrooms than YA. Side note, I think that this is an opportunity and we should be using more books published for YA in high schools, but that's a conversation unto itself.



[laughter]

CLS: So, I will just say that there is a real chance that a book like *Ancestor Approved* would be used heavily in classrooms and in schools, especially because it's a short story collection. So, a teacher might assign one or more of the stories, but not necessarily all of them depending.

I can certainly imagine where a teacher from, say, Oklahoma might assign stories that at Kim Rogers Flying lesson story, which is about a Wichita girl who's based in Oklahoma and then travels to Michigan because they have that local regional tie.

So, I was very aware that it had that potential to be both kind of embraced, like a full hug, but also unpacked and given in more bite-size chunks for kids as a springboard to conversations in the classroom. That's kind of a dual purpose when you're thinking about it.

But in terms of the craft, I think for middle schoolers, because they are new readers, they're also readers who are building confidence. And one of the reasons that we chose to seed these repetitive elements from story to story, was to reward them for continuing; that they would have that feeling of accomplishment every time they finish one of the short stories.

That is something unto itself, right? They read something with a beginning and a middle and an end; and they have done that, that is a really terrific thing. If you are 8, 9, 10, 11, 12 years old, that's a big deal, especially depending on what your reading level is. And meanwhile, you have this sort of carrot saying, "Hey, if I loved Joey from Dawn Quigley's story and I keep going, I might meet that character again." And, in fact, they will.

GP: I love that, the idea of sort of rewarding them for their efforts in reading. The other thing too that I noticed is there's a beautiful simplicity to the storylines, which I think had this been, say, a novel with interwoven characters, it would be a lot to take in.

But because each story is very contained, we can have the complexity of lots of different times and storylines and plot threads and characters. But also, like you said, there's that feeling of accomplishment.

You read one story, there's that feeling of like, 'Okay, I know what happened to that character.' Like, we have closure of some sort with that character, which is very satisfying, I think for a reader.

CLS: There's a reflection too in a sort of value-system world-view. If you look at most books for young readers, you'll have that one strong protagonist – or maybe two – with a particular desire line. It's driven by what that person wants and the obstacles that they face.

And there are certainly Native books like that; and they are authentic, and there is absolutely a way to do it. At the same time, there is a heightened emphasis on community, per se.

So, how do you make a book that it may have a central character, but is really about their connections to a lot of people – it's not necessarily all conflict-driven me against the world – and present so many characters and degrees of relationship to the protagonist, and whatever they might be navigating in a way that is still accessible to someone who is 10 years old, and this may be the first time they've ever read an anthology?

GP: Yeah. You know, it's interesting too, especially if you're thinking of, you know, this book being in the hands of kids who maybe have been just, all that they've written – or read, rather, are books that are very, these individual characters, right? Like that's a very western culture sort of storyline; like the heroic character who does their thing.



And when you're used to reading a story that's framed in that way, it might be kind of hard to hold all the different, sort of a more community-focused storyline. Like really, as you were talking, it hit me like a ton of bricks – like wow, this is like a multi-protagonist book.

Like it's a very different feeling from an individualistic narrative. And it's such a great primer for someone who might not be used to that kind of storytelling to navigate it and still be able to make their way through it and make sense of it, but do it in a way that's sort of, almost like training them to read in a new way.

CLS: It's a We book.

GP: Yes.

CLS: W-E, as opposed to a Me book, M-E. And we talk a lot about diversity and representation in terms of authorship and content in children's books, but we don't talk as much about worldview and literary styles.

GP: Yeah.

CLS: So that is-- I mean, yes, it is certainly important to have voices informed by lived experienced crafting books for young readers, but what about it is important; and yet, it is their knowledge, it is their role modeling, but it's also drawing from different storytelling traditions that are immersed in different ways of seeing how each of us and all of us function. And that's sort of the next level conversation.

GP: Yeah. And the whole idea of the powwow as sort of the anchoring event in the story too, totally ties to that because as we were discussing right before we started the interview, like it is very much about embracing and including, like I had said before, that – I felt welcomed. I felt like I was being welcomed into a community as a guest. And it felt very, very positive feeling as I was reading the book.

CLS: I hope so. intertribal powwow, a competition powwow like this one is open to the public. These are family events. They're a great educational opportunity. They are celebrations of culture and heritage; and they also push back against some of the stereotypical pop culture imagery, where so many kids today they have these glimpses of what Native people were or are that are more rooted in a kind of Hollywood mythology than in real life.

So, not everybody is going to be able to go to one in-person, although there are certainly opportunities across the continent, but any kid can pick up this book and have that experience; and also, get to know some of these characters on a more three-dimensional human level.

So, it's not just, this is a story about Native kids, this is a story about Joey. This is a story about Ray, where you really-- This is a story about Maggie, where you're forming a relationship; and you're seeing those commonalities, and you're gaining a respect and appreciation for what the cultural nuances and differences might be, but in a way that says, "Hi, we can be friends, let's gather."

GP: Yeah. And that whole idea, I think totally ties to what you were saying just before about the worldview; and like it's so reflective of that kind of communal – like the We book worldview, which so, it ties everything so well together.

You know, one of the things I thought was really interesting, probably my two favorite stories, I almost think of them as one story because they're kind of like mirror images of each other are Alan and Kevin.

CLS: Oh, yes.



GP: Can you talk a little bit about that? Because that couldn't have happened just with like a, "Hey, you've got--" I mean, there had to be like some serious coordinated effort there.

CLS: [laughs] Well, those stories are by Brian Young, who is one of our Heartdrum debut authors. I'm very excited because his first novel, *Healer of the Water Monster*, comes out this summer; and we're just thrilled about that.

He sent in a longer story about both characters; and I loved all of it, but for it to fit into an anthology, even though there is some real variation in the length, this still went beyond kind of what our general perimeter might be.

And, at the same time, there was this natural way to look at it as a 'he said, he said' kind of story. You have essentially, two frenemies who are becoming friends; and they also highlight something that was really important thematically to what we were trying to do with the anthology.

The last thing we wanted was for a young reader to go through all of the stories and put it down and think, 'Oh, what Native people do is powwow – the end'. When there are tribes that very much embrace that cultural practice, tribes that don't, but there may be folks who are there because they're traders, their family sells artisan works at the powwow or they're food vendors, or they are there for some other role.

They're there because a friend of theirs is into it, even though it's not their own tradition. And so, you have these two kids – one of whom was very enthusiastic, one of whom wasn't – and also, had conflicts of their own that were rooted in their individual dynamics between each other and also their lives more broadly. So, a lot of the heart of the diversity within theme was contained in that pairing of stories.

GP: I love that. And you know, the other thing that I thought was so cool about those stories is that there's certain things that overlap exactly. Like there's certain lines of dialogue that when we see it in Alan's version and then we see it again in Kevin's version of the story, the thoughts that they're thinking when the dialogues going on are different.

Like obviously, because we're in different character's heads, but the words that are being said are exactly the same. But then, there's some spots where the words are not exactly the same; there isn't an exact match. And I thought that was so indicative also of how the world is, right?

Like, we might remember our side of the story differently than the way the other person remembers their side of the same interaction. So, I thought that those small discrepancies captured it really well, that feeling of real life.

CLS: You have to look at the point of view distinctions, how each of those two characters experiences their moments together, and in a way that is emblematic of how each of the characters in the anthology over, all experiences going to the same event.

Let's say, you came up to someone and you said, "So, you went to Dance for Mother Earth Powwow in Ann Arbor, what is it like?" And you received an impression of it, right?

"It was a place where you reunited with family. It was a place where you met a brother that you had never met before. It was a place where you made a friend for the first time. It was a place that's all about the dance and the drum. It's a place where your brothers are teasing you because you can't chop anything but lettuce."

All of that is in point of view, and it bursts open these sort of default images. It adds a more sophisticated and deeper understanding. So, when we're looking at those two characters who, you know, they're from the same home, they have a history together, but they're very different kids going through different things.



At the same time, over the course of those two stories, they come to understand one another. And those points of view, those memories and how they tell them is rooted in their perspectives, but it's also rooted in their reliability.

GP: Yeah.

CLS: Narrative reliability varies. I mean, that's why-- Recovering law graduate, here.

[laughter]

CLS: First, eyewitness testimony can be slippery.

GP: Yes. I remember taking a Psychology of Law class in college; and yes, very much so. You know, one of the other things too that you mentioned, this idea of how the same event is seen by the different characters in different ways – and sort of how Alan and Kevin's dynamic is emblematic of that.

The other thing that came into my mind is, this isn't just generic powwow. It's not like they all went to a powwow and-- It's very specific. It is this specific event in this specific school. Like you said, there's a world that's very tightly built around it.

Can you talk about sort of the process of choosing that location? Because I would imagine there's more than just that one event that you could have chosen from. What made you choose that one in Ann Arbor in Michigan – that specific powwow, that location, et cetera?

CLS: Absolutely. I mean, yes, there are intertribal across the continent; and these are public events. There are other kinds of powwows that are not. But we wanted something that any kid could go to and that that would be culturally appropriate. So, that part was an easy choice.

Ann Arbor was chosen for a couple of different reasons. One, I wanted to make sure that there was some First Nation's representation. And so, when I say that, I'm talking about when really the US Canadian border is not our border.

You know, if you look at the Ojibwe bands, you'll see that there are people on both sides of – what we now call – the United States; and – what we now call – Canada. So, it was important to me that we didn't default that sort of colonialist mindset, that we will just do characters and writers from within the United States.

That is not our community. Our community stretches further, and it stretches beyond the southern border as well. So, by placing it in Ann Arbor, that created an opportunity to make it more plausible. Choosing a university town, specifically, meant that there would be people from all over the continent, all over the world who were there because there is a major college, per se.

GP: Yeah.

CLS: That intrinsically, is going to draw a much wider, more diverse population than if it were, say, a local Science & Technology event in a particular area that was just for kids in that school district, for example.

GP: I mean, the other thing that occurred to me is maybe, you know, as a New Yorker, thinking Ann Arbor, like logistically getting there, you could have people from all over the continent also. I guess logistically, like you could drive there from the East Coast, the West Coast, New Mexico, wherever.



CLS: Right. In the middle-ish.

GP: Yeah.

CLS: It's close enough to a major airport in Detroit; and it's trainable from a number of places, including Chicago, which has a particularly large urban Indian population. So, that was another factor; we wanted to show kids who were kids from reservations, kids from small towns, kids from cities, because Native kids are found in all communities.

Certainly, our tribal communities are home, but the vast majority of Native kids today live in large urban centers like New York or Los Angeles.

GP: So, you mentioned the world-building, the Trello board, which I think is just awesome. We use Trello, or we used to use it to plan out our podcast. But you mentioned like the world-building elements. How did you decide on that specific time of year – as you mentioned Michigan, has all sorts of weather? So, was that a choice in terms of like, when the powwow would be? Was it because that's when it always is every year? How did you choose the time?

CLS: It was based on the real-life powwow. We wanted something that would feel concrete and specific, rather than an every powwow. And also, that way, if there was a specific location, young readers could sort of trace where each of the characters had come from and how they got there, because the journeys themselves were part of many of the stories.

You know, riding the train, riding in the car with your parents, riding on a bus with a whole bunch of Choctaw elders who take forever to get a snack and go to the restroom, whatever it might be. That gave a more concrete sense of the first, sort of, arc of the book where we're getting everyone into the arena.

GP: Yes, totally. So, the other thing I was wondering about, you've described the process of getting the stories and then you wrote your story. How did you decide the order? Because the order, I think, is also very important in anthology. It can, in some ways, it completely changes the perspective that you have on the stories.

For instance, had Kevin's story been first, before Alan's, Kevin would've come off in a much worse light, I think, because he's kind of the less likable of the two. So, we kind of need to see him warm up in Alan's story than to be able to embrace him in his story.

I'm guessing that there are other characters too that we needed to see sooner so that the Easter eggs later would show up. How did you decide the order of the whole arc?

CLS: Do you ever see one of those television shows where someone's trying to solve a mystery, and they have it spread out all over their wall with little pieces of yarn going in different directions?

[laughter]

GP: I love it.

CLS: There was a certain amount of that. I did print all of the stories, and the sort of yarn theory was for the connections; and then for the order, I just kept shuffling them like a deck of cards. I would play for it in different--



I knew, generally, that if the story started before the powwow at the powwow or on the second day of the powwow, they were going to be roughly somewhere in the beginning, somewhere in the middle, or somewhere toward the end.

And then, within each of those groups, I was looking for transition pieces to bridge each of those arcs; and also, what was happening to the tone of the story in the whole. So, it's not only just the connections when you introduce which character and what they're doing, but it's also kind of the ebb and flow of emotion in the story.

Some are more tender, some are lighter and funnier; and I wanted that to provide an emotional journey for the reader, even with the understanding that sometimes with the anthology stories will be read out of order.

GP: Right. Yeah. There is that element of it as well that like if a teacher assigns the eighth story in the anthology, the reader's not going to have the benefit of having read stories 1-through-7. So, that needs to stand on its own.

But it's almost like the, that once you've seen a story, it creates that imprint, mental imprint; and then like that imprint passes along to the other stories and sort of enriches each one as you read the next one.

CLS: That is the goal. And another important element for me was coming to realize that there was an opportunity to address some of the overarching cultural contacts through the poems at the beginning and end.

Initially, it was going to be a prose short stories collection; and that was the vision for the book. And attended as faculty a workshop called Loon Song Turtle Island that was coordinated by Debby Dahl Edwardson, for Native writers, specifically in Cook, Minnesota. It was--

It was gorgeous. It was on a lodge; it was at the lake. And one of the Native writers there was Carole Lindstrom, who is the author of *We Are Water Protectors* - illustrated by Michaela Goade – which is one of the most exquisite picture books of 2020 and possibly ever, I would say ever.

I heard her read the manuscript for that while I was there; and I was just absolutely blown away by the gorgeousness of the language, but also, reminded of how much heavy-lifting poetry can do in terms of conveying meaning in a few words.

One of my concerns with the history and evolution of Native books for young readers is that tension between the books as literary art themselves and the books as vehicles for information.

When I first started as a Native writer, I was lovingly told by people who knew a lot and really meant well that my books were not for Native kids; my books would be for non-Native kids to learn about Native people.

And so, they needed to be kind of chock-full of digestible information nuggets, which slowed down stories, which diffused humanity. And, for a long time, a lot of Native books tended to have, kind of, infomercial paper doll characters because they were trying to serve that purpose at the expense of story.

There's attention to it. I believe that with this book, a book like *Ancestor Approved*, that goal of illuminating Native people and culture is absolutely achieved; and can be achieved by dropping kids into the world and having them figure it out on the human-to-human level, including non-Native kids.

There are kids who are reading across tribal affiliation, but I also thought, 'Well, if we could express through an opening and closing poem, the sort of broader context of what powwow was, not in



encyclopedic way or a textbook way, but going to the heart and spirit of it, it would provide some of the connective tissue to enter and depart from that world within our world with a feeling of more confidence.

So, it's not prioritizing non-Native readers over Native readers; it's saying to both, "Let's reflect and celebrate the journey that we're about to take, and then let's reflect and celebrate the journey that we have taken and what it means."

So, having a writer like Carole Lindstrom who's one of the most tremendous poets writing today, kind of, set tone for the ending and then Kim for the beginning, it just, I believe, created a more holistic experience; and one that goes a little bit deeper into the spirit.

GP: You know, one of the things that you said that really struck me, this idea of dropping the reader into the world, and that was definitely a feeling-- I mean, this is a world that was very new to me. I felt like I was fully immersed in it.

As I mentioned earlier, I also felt very welcomed into it, but I almost feel like in a way, that makes it more enriching because I was thinking, you know, if I'm a kid – and probably even as an adult – I'm dropped into this world and I'm reading about fry bread or about jingle dresses and if I don't know what a jingle dress is, what am I going to do?

I'm going to go on the internet or I'm going to look for a book; and then I will actually pursue the additional information in order to understand what, you know, like to have a picture of it or to have an image of it.

So, in a way, I almost feel like it encourages more immersion than if there had been like little footnote-type nuggets that broke up the story and said, "Well, this is what it looks like," or "Here's a diagram of what this might be". I don't know. To me, it almost feels more educational in that way.

CLS: I hope so. And you know, because there are many Native voices featured in the book, someone who is faced with a question about some dynamic that is brought up in Indian by Eric Gansworth, for example, can go to Eric's novels *If I Ever Get Out of Here* or *Give Me Some Truth*; and they'll learn more contextually from that.

I remember when I was young, I took French language; and I did study abroad in France during law school. And for years and years in school, I had studied France and the language.

But the learning experience was so much more intense and productive when I was literally by myself in Paris, hadn't met a single person yet and had to figure out how to get to where I was staying, how to give directions to a cab driver, how to take my accent up to a point in which it was discernible to someone who was not in my classroom in the United States.

There is something about submersion that is deeply educational and sticks more, it goes further into us. We have to work harder for it. It's a more active process; and so, there's more integration of what is learned into our psyche or worldview, our knowledge base.

GP: I think also the idea that it taps into a lot of different-- Like when you're fully immersed in something, either by being immersed in a story or by being immersed in a culture, or both, there's that, the multisensory aspect of it I think cements that learning a lot more.

I think there's even data on this that like when people are fully immersed in a story like, you know, hearing and seeing the images et cetera, that there's something about that that triggers parts of our brains.



CLS: It's sort of the theater of the mind's eye.

GP: Exactly.

CLS: You have that vicarious experience. Certainly, if you ask anyone about their favorite book, many people will talk about those characters; and they know them and perhaps care about them on a much deeper level than someone who's been living across the street for 20 years, if they haven't formed a significant bond. The fictional people can make a real difference in our lives and how we see the world.

GP: Yeah. You know, it's funny that you say that because as you were describing a couple of the stories earlier, you were mentioning different characters. And I was thinking to myself like, "She talks about them like they're her friends, like she knows them like they are people."

CLS: They are people.

GP: They are people. And I love that. That is just so, so great. I feel like we could keep talking for hours on this and even more things, but in the interest of time, I'd love to hear like, what's coming up next for you?

I know you've got a couple of projects also happening with the Heartdrum imprint as well. So, if you could tell us a little bit about what the imprint is and also what your own projects are, I'm sure our listeners would love to hear it.

CLS: Thank you so much. I will start with Heartdrum books, at the time of this interview, we are celebrating the publication of *The Sea in Winter* by Christine Day. It's her sophomore novel. She was an American Indian Youth Literature Award Honor winner for *I Can Make This Promise*; and we're very excited.

It's a very heartfelt story for Middle Graders about a girl who's recovering from injury, psychologically as much as physically. And then, this summer we're welcoming, as I mentioned, *Healer of the Water Monster* by Brian Young, who wrote the two paired stories that we had talked about in the alternating point of view, as well as the first in a chapter book series called *Jo Jo Makoons*.

And the first one is *Jo Jo Makoons: The Used-to-Be Best Friend Book* by Dawn Quigley. It's about a very spunky Ojibwe girl and her rather unique worldview. It's very funny, it's very daily-life; and I'm absolutely positive that young readers are just going to fall in love with it.

As for me, personally, I'm really excited about my next book. It is a Middle Grade novel called *Sisters of the Neversea*. And it's a contemporary Native update to J.M. Barrie's *Peter and Wendy*, also known as *Peter Pan*.

And essentially, the premise is that stepsisters Lily Roberts, who is Muskogee and Wendy Darling, who is a white British girl, are living in Tulsa with their little brother Michael when they're spirited off to Neverland and must find a way home. So, it was a very interesting process to revisit the *Peter Pan* world-building.

A lot of it is problematic from an indigenous point of view, from gender, from depictions and disability, and to look at what the magic is. And I think that it's very much about the love of blended families; and in this particular case, it'll be about friendship as well.

One of my questions as a young Native child about *Peter Pan* was, 'What were these Native people doing on this island? What tribe were they from? Why were they behaving so strangely?' And none of it made any sense to me.



So, to write them as three-dimensional kids from the 21st century who have plenty of attitude and opinions; and are, as always, fully realized human beings on the page was refreshing.

Although I would say that the role of girls in the story, you know, not everyone is madly in love with Peter in my vision. Not that, he doesn't have his charms, but maybe there's more to light than that, and maybe part of that is standing strong for each other.

GP: Can you tell us a little bit also about what the Heartdrum imprint is; and also, what your role in that, in the imprint? Because you're heavily involved in it, right?

CLS: Yes. I'm the author-curator. Author-curator is sort of a new thing in the world of books. Essentially, I do a lot of developmental work with up-and-coming Native writers; those who are working on submissions for the imprint. I'm teaching an annual workshop through We Need Diverse Books for Native writers; and We Need Diverse Books is a partner in the Imprint with Harper Children.

We're publishing stories by Native writers and illustrators that are centered in what's currently called The United States and Canada are in publishing the North American market. And our emphasis is on contemporary and recent histories. So, historically, a lot of books published about Native people were set in the very distant past.

And our interest is in modern stories as well as that, you know, misty historical realm of the 1980s and 90s. You know, because Native people didn't stop doing interesting things.

The vast majority of what we're doing is fiction, although we're doing a very select amount of narrative literary non-fiction; and it's for all age markets, board books through Young Adults, both realism and speculative fiction, as well as kind of a slipstream prose, graphic format, poetry.

It really just depends on what comes to us. I would say right now, our list is very picture book and Middle Grade heavy, but we have acquired a of Young Adult projects.

GP: That is super exciting. I love it. And I love that this imprint exists. Like, that's just-- That's amazing. So, I always like to end with the same question, what's your number one tip for writers?

CLS: My number one tip for writers would be to find their communities. For me, writing is about the words on the page, but it's also about a journey through life; and it's going to have ebbs and flows. I began writing with serious intention publishing for young readers back in 95, 96.

My first book sold in 98. And there have definitely been moments when I gave up theatrically, and with much stomping around. And if it were not for the loving, steadfast support of so many dear friends who were with me on that road, I don't know that I would've been able to continue forward – especially, in some of those early years where it was particularly discouraging to be a Native writer.

I recall someone saying, "Maybe if Kevin Costner makes a sequel to Dances with Wolves, someone will buy another book from you again," and thinking, 'My life is dependent on Kevin Costner?'

[laughter]

CLS: But you know, I had my friends to tell me that my voice mattered and that even if I was needing to write books about other topics or from other perspectives, I would still be the writer I always was, and would have the opportunity to make my voice heard when the time was right.



And if it weren't for their faith in me, I wouldn't have had faith in myself. So, I really do think community is important, and that is very much tying back into our conversation about Ancestor Approved, where each of us is reflected in one another.

And that crosses not only a myriad of identity elements, but just a way of looking at the world where I hope becomes more important to people beyond the Native community because all of humanity is so interdependent. We really are all related, and that's how we're going to get through a brighter future.

GP: That is such, such great advice. And I have to say, I can totally relate to the stomping and – as my husband often refers to it – ‘the gnashing of teeth freak out phase of Gabriela’s creative process’.

But I think every writer’s hit that wall at some point, and having a community can be just game-changing in those moments. So, thank you for reminding us and grounding us in that. Thank you so much for being here today, Cynthia. It has been an absolute pleasure speaking with you.

CLS: Thank you. I dearly appreciate your interest, your hospitality, and your enthusiasm for Native voices and visions.

GP: All right, word nerds. Thanks so much for listening. Keep writing and keep being awesome.

